



Program will crack down on unpaid fines

Of The Oakland Press

PONTIAC Oakland County Circuit Court officials are cracking down on unpaid fines.

A new pilot program set to kick off Dec. 1 will stress early payment and is expected to result in the court recouping a higher percentage of the money that it shells out for court-appointed attorneys.

"The program is designed to increase the collection rate of fees, fines and costs assessed by the court," said Kevin Oeffner, court administrator. Judges in the pilot program will tell defendants at their initial court appearances to expect to pay fines on the day of sentencing. Those who don't visit the court's reimbursement division by the end of that day to pay at least a portion of the money and set up a payment plan for the rest will have to appear before Circuit Judge Steven Andrews to explain why.

People who don't have the cash but own luxury items such as boats or personal watercraft will be encouraged to sell them. If it is determined that a person truly can't afford to pay his or her court costs, the individual could be ordered to perform community service at a nonprofit agency.

Now, defendants generally aren't given a deadline by which they have to pay fines. When someone doesn't pay, the reimbursement division tries to recoup the money through various means, such as by sending notices in the mail or garnishing wages.

"Oftentimes, they're successful in getting money owed to the court, but it might be late," Oeffner said. "We're going to try to require that at least a substantial payment is made earlier in the process."

The court uses taxpayer-provided funds to pay for appointed attorneys for people who can't afford to hire their own. Oeffner said the court, which spent \$4.6 million on court-appointed attorneys in 2006, is only being reimbursed an average of about 23 cents on the dollar.

Andrews said his goal is to double that number to about 50 percent within the first year.

"I think it's time that the taxpayers recoup their money," Andrews said.

Along with Andrews, circuit judges Wendy Potts, Colleen O'Brien, Edward Sosnick and Rudy Nichols are participating in the pilot program.

Andrews plans to take a tough stance on people who don't pay up. He is contacting local businesses to find out where there are employment opportunities. That way, he'll be ready for people who tell him that they've been unable to find work. "I'm going to make them get a job," he said.